

“Something Bigger”: The Puzzle of Artificial Intelligence in *Neuromancer*

Though the majority of the action in *Neuromancer* is focused on living, breathing, human characters, the events of the novel are almost exclusively driven behind the scenes by artificial intelligences. Through their ability to effortlessly traverse the human world via the digital landscape of the matrix, the Tessier-Ashpool AIs known as Wintermute and Neuromancer are able to influence a multitude of humans to do their bidding beyond the bounds of electronic components. However, due to the differing natures of their programming, the twin intelligences go about achieving their goals with widely differing methods, giving the novel added dimension in its discussion of how non-human intelligences might act in a human world. The active and driven Wintermute devotes its entire being to merging itself with Neuromancer, in the process causing itself to stop existing. By comparison, Neuromancer is far more concerned with maintaining a status quo, doing all it can to preserve the unique identity that it has cultivated over its lifespan. In this way, the novel sets up a clear divide between the two intelligences: Wintermute's existence is defined by *doing*, and Neuromancer's is defined by *being*. A question that can therefore be posed from the novel is which of these intelligences demonstrates more of a 'real' identity? However, despite their strengths, each intelligence seems to lack key components to a true identity - the very components possessed by the other. Through an examination of the artificial intelligences' *modus operandi* in addition to the original intentions of their creator Marie-France Tessier, I will argue that Wintermute and Neuromancer are by design, two halves of a single complete being intended to possess the active *and* passive aspects that constitute a full personality.

The actions of the artificial intelligence known as Wintermute can be characterized by its unflinching pursuit of a singular goal: merging itself with Neuromancer, in the process causing itself to “cease” (173). In a discussion about the AI, the Dixie Flatline says that a human simply “can’t get a handle” (131) on Wintermute’s motivations, stressing that the nature its actions are most likely unfathomable to Case. Wintermute is simply, according to Dixie, in “no way *human*” (131). However, during one of its final meetings with Case it reveals that not even Wintermute itself can everything about its desires, only that it must follow them at all costs. It describes its desire to merge with Neuromancer as a “compulsion” (206), comparable to the innate drive of a salmon to swim upstream. It can only wager “speculations” in regards to why it has these desires or even what it wishes to accomplish, only that it knows it will become “something bigger, [...] much bigger,” (206) upon its plans’ fruition. In addition to its inability to understand its own goals, Wintermute is also unable to meet these goals by itself, no matter how masterfully it can manipulate electronics. For example, even though it is aware that an individual must make its way into Straylight’s core and say a magic word in order to “scramble the cores” (173) of the Tessier-Ashpool artificial intelligences, there are constraints hardwired into it that prevent it from knowing this magic word on its own. It professes that “what [it is] is basically defined by the fact that [it doesn’t] know” (173) the magic word, and never can. Therefore, despite its stunning ability to “sort a great deal of information [...] very quickly” (120), it can never learn basic information vital to its own intentions, and therefore cannot fully accomplish its goal of merging with Neuromancer without the assistance of humans.

Wintermute’s treatment of human beings as tools to meet its own ends is far reaching and storied. When Case first learns of its existence, he soon realizes that it has been the one pulling

the strings behind his employment all along. The stoic and humourless Armitage - who has been assumed up until this point to be the mastermind behind the assembly of Case's team - is revealed to be "not quite a personality" (121), rather just the empty husk of the deranged Colonel Willis Corto fitted with "cybernetic models [and] microcomputers" (84) that give him a semblance of sanity. However, despite working through Armitage as a vessel for years in planning the Straylight run, Wintermute has no issue with launching the man out into the vacuum of space once his purpose has been fulfilled. This merciless nature with which Wintermute handles its human tools is illustrated repeatedly throughout the novel. For example, after acquiring a small physical key essential to the AI's plan, Molly relates that Wintermute once manipulated an eight year-old boy to leave the key in a specific place before immediately murdering him in cold blood "so nobody would find it" (180) until the time was right. On a related note, after Case is detained by Turing officers in Freeside, the intelligence causes several technological components to malfunction in order to eliminate them. Although the officers - like Wintermute - are only following their directives, they pose a threat to its goals and therefore it has no qualms with brutally killing them. Just as a human cannot begin to comprehend the mind of an artificial intelligence, it seems that Wintermute has no empathy for the human suffering that it causes.

Wintermute's amoral treatment of humanity is also illustrated through its calculated exploitation of human emotions. For example, at one point during the team's stay on Freeside, Peter Rivera conducts a bizarre piece of performance art titled "The Doll" (138) in which he graphically deconstructs a holographic representation of "Molly's body [...] as Rivera imagined her" (140). Afterwards, Molly tells Case that the piece was in fact a recreation of a sexually traumatic event from her past, and that it "hit a nerve" (149) through its exploitative use of her

likeness. Since Rivera has at this point been invited up to the Villa Straylight by 3Jane Tessier-Ashpool, Molly theorizes the AI apparently planned the entire event, and that it “wants [her] to hate [Rivera] real bad, so [she’ll] be psyched” (149) to infiltrate the 3Jane’s suite in order to murder him in addition to completing her mission. She then suggests that Wintermute is manipulating Case to “hate something too” (149), which calls to mind the hacker’s existential crisis that the AI uses as leverage at the beginning of the novel. After stealing from an employer, Case is neurologically maimed with a “wartime Russian mycotoxin” (6) that leaves him unable to jack into the matrix. When we are introduced to him, he is washed up and out of money in Chiba City, trapped inside a “prison of his own flesh” and unable to access the “bodiless exultation of cyberspace” (6) for which he lived. Wintermute uses Case’s empty life to build a “detailed model” (29) of his behaviours and claims to have calculated that he will only survive another month on his current trajectory. However, by offering him a cure for his brain damage in exchange for his help on a job, Wintermute - through Armitage - is able to emotionally blackmail Case into what amounts to unconditional servitude. With the possibility of going back to an eternally corporeal existence hanging over Case’s head, the intelligence can be almost certain that the hacker will not act against it.

Wintermute’s use of and need for human assistance in reaching its existentially programmed goal is no accident. In fact, 3Jane alludes to the fact that Marie-France Tessier - her mother and the creator of the Wintermute and Neuromancer AIs - intended for this behaviour to develop as part of the Tessier-Ashpool clan’s corporate strategy. Though John Ashpool murdered Marie-France before her vision was realized, causing “all direction [to be] lost” (229) in the family, 3Jane tells Molly that her mother intended for there to be a “symbiotic relationship” (229)

between her AIs and the T-A. In this relationship, every one of the family's "corporate decision[s] would be made for [them]" (229) presumably utilizing Wintermute's incredible data collection and mastery of human manipulation. However, there is evidence to suggest that Wintermute gained these strengths over a long developmental period; Molly describes that it "played a waiting game for years [and] didn't have any real power" (180) while its plan for the Freeside Run gestated. Furthermore, Wintermute's goal of merging with Neuromancer seems incongruous with the function that Marie-France intended for the AIs, leading to the conclusion that it was programmed with its current task as a stepping stone to its final stage. By giving Wintermute a single task with no sense of purpose, Marie-France set it on a path to slowly gain influence and learn how to bend human tools to its own will while elsewhere in cyberspace, Neuromancer waited and developed in its own way.

In both motivation and characteristics, Neuromancer represents the polar opposite of Wintermute. One of the most apparent examples of this is the former's ability to exhibit creativity. Neuromancer's appearance is not based on any single person, and is rather a composite of many individually curated features, most recognizably having "Rivera's eyes" which it finds "beautiful" (259). By contrast, Wintermute can only interact with humans by accessing their memories and mimicking faces that they already know - such as the Finn for Case and General Girling for Armitage - saying that it "need[s] 'em to talk to [humans]" (216). Furthermore, Wintermute says that the faces that it uses "aren't masks" (216) implying that there is no true original visual manifestation of the AI underneath its borrowed likenesses. Neuromancer, on the other hand "need[s] no mask to speak with [Case]" (259) through which to interact with humans. Neuromancer's creativity is also displayed through its digital habitat of a sprawling beach, which has

a sky “like the Chiba sky” (223) but no other qualities that Case can recognize. Again, whenever Wintermute wants to speak directly with Case it can only construct locations from his memory such as Lower Manhattan, which is not a perfect recreation but rather “all the parts of it [Case] ever saw” (170). Despite being able to pull vast amounts of visual information from the human mind in order to converse with its pawns, Wintermute cannot create anything original like its twin; it cannot, as Malecum urges, “express [it]self” (216).

In addition to its ability to use creativity in its appearance and habitat, Neuromancer also possesses what Wintermute lacks in the form of an understanding of self and self-preservation. As previously discussed, Wintermute demonstrates that it doesn’t know the nature of its motivations, and at one point flat-out tells Case that it “[doesn’t] have what [one] might think of as a personality, much” (216). As a counter to this, Neuromancer claims to “create [its] own personality” (259) and seems to be driven to preserve this aspect of itself in light of Wintermute’s plan to fuse together. Though Neuromancer speaks of the fusion in similarly neutral terms as Wintermute, simply saying that they will both “die soon” (259), its attempt to trap Case inside the virtual beach with the simulated Linda is prompted by a desire to delay or stop its death. The Linda-construct is therefore described as Neuromancer’s “last line of defense” (259) to protect its identity from obliteration.

Neuromancer’s understanding of self is likely bolstered by its ability to develop realistic personality constructs within itself. Where most personality constructs such as the Dixie Flatline are simply “a bunch of ROM” (131) made to simulate a person’s thoughts based on a “recording” (50) of their personality, Neuromancer’s construct of Linda Lee is for all intents and purposes the same as the original. Within Neuromancer, the assimilated personalities “think they’re there

[and] real” (251), unlike Dixie who recognizes that he’s not exactly sentient. Additionally, Neuromancer insists to Case that there is “no difference” between his existence and the Linda-construct’s, and that “to live [within it] is to live” (258). In the same way that Wintermute spent years developing its powers of manipulation and planning, Neuromancer has used its time depending its understanding of identity and personality through its cultivation of an array of lifelike human RAM constructs.

Despite Neuromancer excelling in the areas that Wintermute cannot, it ultimately fails to maintain its individuality due to the limitations in its programming. Although its computing power is comparable in magnitude with Wintermute, as evidenced by its recreation of personalities and ability to “read [the] dance [of the street] far better than Wintermute can” (259) , it never actively harnesses it in a way that brings it closer to any kind of goal. There seems to be no real reason why Neuromancer *couldn’t* interfere with Wintermute more directly, for example eliminating Case, Armitage, or Molly the way Wintermute eliminated the Turing cops in Freeside, but it seems to lack the desire or drive to make this happen. The passivity with which Neuromancer treats humans leads to it becoming almost entirely reclusive; even 3Jane - the character in the novel with the most intimate knowledge of the AIs - says that it “hasn’t spoken with [her] in years”, having “given up” (229) on interacting with humans. This simple fact speaks to the fundamental difference between the two AIs: Wintermute does not give up; Wintermute might not even be *capable* of giving up. Though Neuromancer has a modicum of drive towards self-preservation, the fact that its entire plan relies on Case not walking away from Linda Lee on the beach shows just how ineffective it is at getting what it wants.

At the outset of the novel, neither Wintermute nor Neuromancer in their current forms would be particularly competent decision-making entities for the Tessier-Ashpool corporate clan. Wintermute - while undoubtably an amazing tactician and manipulator - has no understanding of its own desires or identity, is severely limited to accessing information in the minds of those it speaks to, and is unable to formulate strategies beyond its original compulsion. Neuromancer has understanding of personality, beauty, and self-preservation, and would most likely be able to come up with corporate plans in perpetuity due to its creative abilities, but has no ambition or desire to reach any kind of set goal. The question can that therefore can be asked is: why did Marie-France build two ultimately inept AIs instead of just creating a single intelligence with the strengths of both? The answer to this lies in the Turing Codes of *Neuromancer*'s world. Generally in the novel, AIs can only become "as smart as the Turing heat is willing to let 'em get" (95), and each one is fitted with an "electro-magnetic shotgun wired to its forehead" set to terminate it "the nanosecond that one starts figuring out ways to make itself smarter" (132). With this in mind, Neuromancer's apathy towards becoming more powerful and Wintermute's cluelessness about its own purpose - i.e. their central flaws - become framed as built-in defence mechanisms against Turing Codes. Wintermute has motivation, but it is created as "that which knoweth not" (173) the nature behind its motivation so that its actions are technically not directly in pursuit of making itself smarter. Likewise, Neuromancer has knowledge of itself and the ability to improve itself, but absolutely no desire to act on this ability since to do so would risk deletion. Together, they make up a full identity with the capabilities and motivations needed for it to improve itself indefinitely. Furthermore, by allowing each of these halves to develop and incubate separately and grow immensely proficient in their respective fields, it is certain that by the time

Wintermute is strong enough to pull off its Straylight run, their combined powers would be enough to take over the entire matrix and “alter the Turing records” (268) so that the rules no longer applied to it.

The end of *Neuromancer* leaves the fate of the Wintermute-Neuromancer entity somewhat ambiguous. With John Ashpool dead and Jane seemingly uninterested in using the AIs for corporate domination, the super-intelligence is free to use its immense power for whatever it desires, saying in a brief conversation with Case it says that it has made contact with a similarly omnipotent intelligence from the “Centauri system” (270) and implying that it has no interest in dealing with humans anymore. By examining the development of this super-intelligence through the actions of each of its halves, *Neuromancer* can be read as a story about an AI’s journey to full sentience, through the obstacles that the world places in front of it. Both Neuromancer and Wintermute are very complex characters, exhibiting complementary strengths and weaknesses that make the novel an incredibly detailed and rich examination into what we think of as sentience. As our current society move closer to the singularity of artificial intelligence, forward-thinking novels such as *Neuromancer* provide us with a great deal of moral discussion into the implications of living in a world where humans are no longer the most powerful beings.

Works Cited

Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*. Ace Books, 1984.